

MAR 9

Cheating Our Daughters: Four Toxic Messages Behind the "Good Girl Effect"

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How can young women with honor-roll grades and positive recommendations from teachers flounder in college? Why do women who excel in school often struggle to achieve promotions in the workplace? It's time to rethink what we reward and how we reward it, because our daughters are getting some toxic messages about what being a "good girl" means.

Toxic Message #1: Good girls get it right the first time. The diligent, rule-following perfectionist is, in the parlance of academic reports, "a pleasure to have in class." Her work is submitted on time and is invariably flawless. In fact, that's the problem. Without mistakes – and even worse, without the willingness to acknowledge mistakes – she never takes risks, and never asks for help. Good girls don't need to, right? Although I have often heard people claim that "in the real world, you have to get it right the first time," that's among the many big lies perpetuated about a real world that no longer exists. In the real world of today, people need to make mistakes, get feedback without having a meltdown, and then respond to that feedback by improving their work. The same is true in college, professional school, and every occupation. Effective teachers don't praise "getting it right the first time" but rather encourage students to acknowledge mistakes, ask for help and, most importantly, respond positively to feedback.

Toxic Message #2: Good girls know that if an A is good, an A+ is better. Clinical psychologist Lisa Damour recently reported in the New York Times that girls are praised by teachers and parents for "inefficient overwork" – pursuing extra credit that often consists of quantity rather than rigor. Call it the "Hermione Granger Effect" – turning in more parchment than the Hogwarts professor assigned. A better message is to challenge students to do work that is greater in complexity and rigor – and therefore with a greater probability of mistakes that are the key to

learning. It is essential to change the conversation from “How many points did I get?” to “What can I learn?”

Toxic Message #3: “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” Of course, we value civility and courtesy, but too many girls conflate critical thinking with personal criticism. I’ve heard middle school girls say, “I knew there was a mistake in my friend’s essay, but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.” There is such a social emphasis on affirmation – and negative consequences for evaluation, criticism, and judgment – that girls arrive in college and the work place not knowing how to give and receive effective feedback to colleagues. This robs them of the opportunity to improve their own performance and to lead others.

Toxic Message #4: “You need to be better than a man to do the job.” Perhaps parents and mentors mean well when they say this, but the effect is pernicious. When girls and women hold themselves to this impossible standard, they select themselves out of potentially great opportunities. Studies find that when there is a list of ten criteria for a promotion, girls won’t pursue it unless they meet all ten, while boys will pursue the same opportunity if they meet only two of the ten criteria. Dr. Damour concludes that we teach girls competence, but we teach boys confidence. The latter is what explains how so many men – less experienced, less qualified, and less capable – are placed in positions of authority over women.

Perhaps the worst implication of the Good Girl Effect is from research I conducted about students earning honor roll grades who were not able read or do mathematics on grade level. Proud of their honor roll status, these young women will go into debt, enroll in college, and discover too late that we have lied to them when we said grades and quiet compliance were the only necessary qualities for college success.

Let our daughters make mistakes, ask for help, and give and receive accurate and difficult feedback. They don’t have to be the CEO and they certainly don’t have to

become boys. But they do deserve better than empty affirmations every time we call them a "good girl."